



## Cultural Heritage across European Borders Bridges or Walls?

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# FORUM

## Borderline Heritages

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### Cultural Heritage Across European Borders Bridges or Walls?

Philip McDermott and Sara McDowell

#### ABSTRACT

Does cultural heritage create either bridges of engagement or walls of division within and beyond Europe? To capture these diverse interpretations, we provide some initial discussion on the concept of heritage and how this relates to identity, memory and the past. In order to introduce the various studies that comprise the forum, we identify a series of collective themes explored by our contributors. These are: the use of heritage sites and practices as a means of exploring questions of European unity; the idea of a decolonizing heritage alongside the reframing of contested transcultural encounters; and finally, the potential for heritage as a form of conflict resolution.

#### KEYWORDS

borders, bridges, heritage, identity, walls, Europe

The forum edition of the *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* is now well-recognised as a space for debates on contemporary themes by both emerging and established scholars. Many of the discussions thus far have focused on the very interpretation and understanding of Europe as a concept and indeed what is viewed as ‘in’ or ‘outside’ of Europe. This forum edition follows on from these debates but draws on the fluid (and contested) term of heritage to illustrate both the opportunities and antagonisms created by its different forms and uses (McDermott et al. 2016; McDermott 2018; McDowell 2008; McDowell and Braniff 2014). Heritage can be broadly understood as the way in which the past is repurposed in, and for, the present. It is both tangible and intangible and is inexorably bound to a plurality of histories, identities, temporalities



and geographies (see Graham and Howard 2008). As David Harvey (2001: 319) observes, heritage is ‘historically contingent’ and interpreted differently across a range of socio-economic, political and cultural contexts and experiences.

A particular feature of the articles in this forum is the way in which heritage can create macro, metaphorical borders around the concept of Europe itself while also creating, solidifying and legitimating internal borders as political or other circumstances dictate (Keinz and Lewicki 2019). Contemporary political debate has raised questions about the future of globalisation and the re-emergence of the nation-state as a tightly bounded entity with clear policies of inclusion and exclusion. This was a tension which came to the fore a decade ago as a result of global recession (Raudon and Shore 2018). Frequently, we have heard soundbites from political elites about the need to build fences or reinforce borders to keep people ‘out’ and those on the other side ‘safe’. As the European Union grapples with a plethora of crises and challenges including renewed waves of separatism, the political mobilisation of the far-right, increased patterns of unexpected migrations, and now a global pandemic, questions about the utility of walls and borders have never been more pronounced. We suggest that heritage practices have become embedded in many of these debates about inclusion and exclusion, playing a fundamentally important role in articulating nationalism, fostering senses of identity and communality as well as emphasising difference.

Regardless of the political rhetoric, people continue to cross European borders en-masse, either by force or by choice. Moreover, Europe is already a patchwork of borderlands where cultural communities come into contact in ways that transcend the notion of political barriers and frontiers. Often these engagements have manifested over centuries and survived the frequent redrawing of maps, usually in the aftermath of conflict, through a multitude of collective memories (Macdonald 2013). The international focus on the concept of heritage as both intangible and tangible, by organisations such as UNESCO (see Ahmad 2006), and the rising focus on heritage as a ‘community resource’, as indicated in the Council of Europe’s Faro Convention, raises the grassroots role of heritage and its potential for regeneration particularly in ways that cross political or other borders (e.g. McDermott and McMonagle 2019; Nic Craith and Fenske 2013; Zagato 2015). The view of heritage as an issue that transcends borders is something that has become more pronounced. The cross-border dynamics of heritage, however, is coming under scrutiny in this era

of heightened populism and questions arise in the heritage space as to whether the idea of walls or bridges, both physical and imaginative, has taken hold. Moreover, practices that are central to heritage, such as commemorating the past, or the interpretation of place are now more frequently understood as driven by multidirectional flows (Erll 2011; Rothberg 2009), themselves spearheaded by processes of globalisation and associated developments such as the convergence of digital technologies.

The six contributions in this Forum address these complex notions of border crossing. They do so, however, in ways which also interrogate the very nature of cultural heritage itself, while also questioning the often pre-supposed norm that bridges are ‘good’ and walls are ‘bad’. We are reminded of the multiple meanings and definitions of heritage. These papers posit questions about ownership, power and controlling narratives of the past: who gets to decide what is remembered or repurposed as heritage? How does heritage reflect on and in people’s identities and lived experiences? Can heritage truly represent a diversity of views and perspectives in plural societies? And what role can it play in conflict transformation? These questions are, of course, deeply entangled with contemporary social and political dynamics. The way in which heritage(s) is (or are) constructed and negotiated in Europe is deeply impacted by seismic shifts in the economy, cultural fabric and political landscape currently shaping societies across the continent and beyond. Global conversations about racism, populism, the legacy of colonialism and conflict, economic inequality and political instability are increasingly mirrored in our heritage practices and the spaces they embody. Each author in this forum addresses one or a number of these issues in their interventions.

### **Reinterpreting ‘European’ Heritage: Exploring European Unity**

Two of the articles discuss contrasting views of European heritage and, by extension, identity. Contributions from David Farrell-Banks and Seamus Montgomery present alternate visions of Europe through the lens of disparate groups such as EU civil servants and far-right extremists to articulate notions of what it means to be European (or not). The place-making nature of heritage is evident in Farrell-Banks’ piece on the far-right. He considers the way in which right-wing populist, nationalist and extremist groups repurpose the memory of the

1683 Siege of Vienna to reframe contemporary Europe as a white, Christian place. By drawing on an historical moment that many on the right believe marked the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the beginning of modern Europe, right-wing populists and extremists have rallied around an idea of Europe that is at odds with Islam and resistant to migration into Europe from non-Christian countries. This particular take on European heritage is, as Farrell-Banks argues, used to mobilise far-right causes both within and outside the borders of Europe. The Siege of Vienna has, in recent years, been used as a ruse to justify and legitimise extremist violence against Muslim communities in places like Norway and New Zealand. Farrell-Banks documents the online circulation of singular interpretations of memory in far-right blogs, suggesting that it is part of a process that calls for a certain type of 'European' unity, while serving nationalistic needs within individual nation-states. He argues that much greater focus must be placed by scholars on how memory heritages have been mobilised across borders in ways that do not build bridges, but which construct cultural borders and advance notions of exclusion and division.

European unity is also the focus of Montgomery's paper on EU personnel in Brussels. He presents accounts of a variety of historical narratives collected during ethnographic fieldwork with civil servants in and around the European Commission in Belgium. A particular focus is placed on the roles that heritage-making practices play in the construction and articulation of European identity and belonging within flagship institutions. His piece documents a collective will by Commission officials to build inclusivity across state borders and forge a European identity and heritage that supersedes nationalism. Many of the officials interviewed support the building of bridges and the tearing down of walls (metaphorically). These wider European heritage narratives, Montgomery argues, tells the story of a supra-national community that arose through the gradual enlargement of external boundaries and the removal of internal ones.

### **Beyond Europe: Decolonizing Heritage and Transcultural Encounters**

Carsten Wergin and Elaine McIlwraith's papers look beyond Europe's borders to think about how transcultural encounters across continents can provide opportunities to challenge hegemonic understandings of the past and redress the legacy of colonialism through heritage.

Wergin draws on his ethnographic work with restitution projects in museums as places of trans-cultural encounter. Drawing on data collected in 2019 during repatriation ceremonies in Germany, the author identifies how European museums and Australian Indigenous custodians set in motion processes of healing through redress and repatriation. The impact, he argues, has resonance not only among Indigenous groups but also for those working with these collections in Europe. Moreover, his contribution posits that such processes mean that ethnographic museums change from supposedly passive exhibition spaces to what might be considered as wider spaces of socio-critical engagement. In particular, this forum article considers the potential that such repatriation practices have on collaborative engagements and how these impact beyond European borders. Whilst they may never fully redress the past, they do instigate a discursive process about European colonialism and the legacy of past wrongs.

McIlwraith considers the idea of a political, cultural and economic bridge between Spain (and Europe) and the Arab world. In this contribution she compares two cultural ‘projects’ in Granada, Spain. These projects promote similar conceptualisations of ‘tolerance’ and ‘dialogue’ upon which this bridge idea is constructed. However, they also provide subtle distinctions when the power dynamics of these social processes are assessed. Counter hegemonic narratives can influence whether or not bridges become walls, bridges are also walls, or the wall narrative is not consolidated. Her assessment is that in the context of an historical border region such as southern Spain the bridge and wall metaphor act simultaneously in the construction of identities in liminal areas.

### **Building Bridges across Walls: Heritage for Conflict Transformation**

Other contributors explore the ways in which heritage practices are employed in deeply divided societies that are attempting to transition from conflict. The evolving role of heritage in Cyprus, a contentious issue throughout the island’s tumultuous history, is the focus of Amy Reid’s piece. The partition of Cyprus in 1974, after many years of animosity between the Turkish and Greek Cypriot populations, has resulted in the destruction of heritage sites and practices on both sides of the Cypriot border. More recently, however, heritage has come to be viewed as a tool that can unite both communities. This article examines the work of one organisation that has drawn on heritage

as a potential contributor to peace and reconciliation, the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage in Cyprus (TCCH). Reid's assessment of the current role of the TCCH, optimistically, is that heritage in this context can be considered as a form of reconciliation. Heritage and place making is deemed a social process, even when dealing with tangible artefacts or places. The meanings of places and things can change for even the most hardened communities when new opportunities arise in the wider political environment, as has been the case with the Cypriot peace process.

Giada Laganà and Timothy White also find hope in heritage. Their paper on peacebuilding initiatives on the Irish border note how multiple actors participate in wider peacebuilding initiatives at border regions in a series of intercultural engagements. They argue that the growth of interaction at the grass roots level has been spearheaded by a recognition from international organisations, such as the EU, that the local context cannot be ignored if communities long divided by borders of the mind as well as physical borders and walls are to be overcome. They also analyse the prescient role of the European Union's PEACE programme in the border region of Ireland. The PEACE programme, which has funded a multiplicity of heritage projects and provided opportunities to explore the history and identity of the 'other' here is judged as a 'bridge builder'. The reconciliatory merit, they posit, is in the establishment of cross-border 'places' that tease communities away from the segregated environments where singular identities tend to emerge. Instead, the PEACE programme provides not merely a cross-community space between Protestants and Catholics living in Northern Ireland, but also connects people from all communities across the international border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Laganà and White's version of the PEACE programme's past impact is optimistic, but we also must now be mindful of its future in light of the UK's withdrawal from the EU and the implications of this for the Northern Ireland peace process.

## Conclusions

This forum edition offers some initial discussion on the ways in which heritage sites and practices provide opportunities to reframe bridge-building and wall building (literally and figuratively) at borders within and across Europe and its regions. We see evidence of a heritage of hope exemplified in the cross-border work and spaces of cultural

encounter in border regions like Cyprus and in Ireland. Imaginaries of Europe are being reframed across multiple scales and for divergent agendas. Walls are being built in the mindset of far-right extremists and populists who present singular visions of what Europe should look like, while civil servants in Brussels configure Europe as a powerful entity capable of superseding nationalism and factionalism and of building bridges. Thus, the articles evidence the multi-dimensional ways in which heritage can both reconcile and antagonise. However, what is clear in all the cases is that this is subject to change and can alter with changing political and social circumstances. In some examples, the antagonism of past memories and identities have been reformulated to provide opportunities for better intercultural dialogue through heritage initiatives. In others, the reconciliatory avenues which were provided by heritage in the past have come to be challenged by new forces, often political, which have contributed to the dismantling of those bridges in favour of the figurative and literal hardening of walls and boundaries (See also Whitehead et al. 2019). What the Forum papers in this issue do indicate is the need for heritage to be considered more widely as a critical issue for Europeans to engage with at multiple levels from community, to state and beyond. This is especially important in the context of a continent defined by internal and external borders. Our experiences in the present, ultimately become our future ‘pasts’. It is such ongoing engagements with heritage which will help us to understand, interpret and potentially shape the inevitable bridges and walls that will continue to be constructed in the future.

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